Volume 1.
Number 6.

Week of
September 23, 1940

Critics' THEATRE REVIEWS

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* *Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play during the week of Sept. 23, 1940.*

† *"Johnny Belinda" opened last Wednesday, September 18th, at the Belasco Theatre. Newspaper Critics' reviews in this issue.*

THEATRE REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS

Critics' Theatre Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York papers

New York Sun	**New York Times**
New York Post	**New York Daily News**
New York Herald Tribune	**New York World-Telegram**

Place this week's reviews with preceding weekly reviews so as to have always an up to date file of the New York Stage.

Published by

CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, 122 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y.

Yearly Subscription
$15.00

"Johnny Belinda"

Reprinted from NEW YORK POST, *September 19, 1940*

Elmer Harris's "Johnny Belinda" at the Belasco

By JOHN MASON BROWN

SUCH soiled soap-bubbles as he has hitherto blown in "Young Sinners" and "A Modern Virgin" made it seem unlikely that a folk-play, however inept, would ever emerge from Dramatist Elmer Harris's clay pipe. But "Johnny Belinda" is such a play—at least by intention.

Although Mr. Harris has abandoned the sophisticated villagers of Long Island or their equivalents for the simpler sea-bound folk of Prince Edward Island off Nova Scotia, and his characters now laboriously say "Mither" instead of hesitating to mention "Mother," Mr. Harris's metamorphosis as a dramatist is not as complete as it might seem.

In spite of the burrs in his dialogue and the supposedly Scotch sobriety of his writing, it is still of arms and the woman that Mr. Harris tries to sing. Threatened virtue continues to provide him with his theme. This time his heroine is not an over-ripe Southern peach or a city siren forgetful of Bishop Manning's frown. She is a poor, hard-used, deaf-mute. But even before a helpful doctor has taught her the sign language, her innocence has suffered a typical Elmer Harris setback.

Although the formerly smiling Mr. Harris is just now as serious as if he were writing "John Ferguson," the only original thing he does as a dramatist during an evening, at once lugubrious and hackneyed in its melodrama, is to inflict upon his heroine the curse of being a deaf-mute.

Heroine Without Words

His choice of such a girl as his more than threatened heroine is as felicitous as the female herself is unfortunate. Her plight not only saves Mr. Harris the labor of writing speeches for her but spares an audience the cliches which (on the basis of the dialogue he has assigned to her fellow characters) he would undoubtedly have heaped upon her.

Once only does this luckless maiden speak during the evening. This is as the final curtain falls on a court-room scene in which, after being acquitted of murder, she gains speech upon being reunited with her baby. Then, calling her child by its name, she says, "Johnny!"

Before this, misfortunes have settled upon her to the accompaniment of paper snow, wind machines, and a mortgage falling due. To be more specific, Mr. Harris's heroine has been at first abused by her gruff father who, after he has come to love her, is struck by lightning. She has been raped by the cad she ultimately shoots. An attempt has been made by some good old stock village gossips to separate her from her illegitimate child. Moreover, these same gossips have ruined the practice of the good young doctor who has taught her the sign language and brought her the only happiness she has ever known. Far and wide they have spread the lie that he is her baby's father.

Had Mr. Harris's Belinda been articulate throughout the evening, the faults of Mr. Harris's script would have been even more clearly exposed than they are. As it is, due particularly to the radiant poignancy of Helen Craig's silences and the grace of her pantomime, her scenes in dumb-show—even her lessons in the rudiments of the sign language—can claim a certain grim novelty and pathos. But her muteness alone is eloquent.

Edward Craig is excellent as the gruff old father. And Horace McNally plays the good young doctor sincerely, though too softly. The others range from fair to less than indifferent. In the hands of another dramatist "Johnny Belinda" might easily have been better. It might have been good. It might even have been passable.

Reprinted from NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE, *September 19, 1940*

Sign Language

By RICHARD WATTS, Jr.

ACCORDING to the new play called "Johnny Belinda," there was an attractive young deaf-and-dumb girl living on Prince Edward Island, off the coast of Nova Scotia, and she was taught the sign language by a sympathetic doctor from the mainland. Unfortunately, her education was somewhat interrupted when she was assaulted by the handsomest seducer on the island. Her father was pretty much annoyed by the rape of his daughter, but he became quite sympathetic about the resulting child just about the time he was unhappily struck by lightning. Then the evil seducer tried to take the child away from the girl, but she got out the family shotgun and killed him. Of course, no jury on earth would convict her, and, just at curtain time, she was paroled in the care of the young doctor, who loved her all the time.

* * *

As you can see for yourself, the new play by Elmer Harris essentially offers us one of the oldest plots in the history of cheap melodrama. It contains all the clichés of its shop-worn school of dramatic writing and it leaves out nothing in the way of tried and familiar thrusts at the emotions. It is shameless in its sentimentality and it seems, indeed, rather proud of it. The curious thing, however, is that by the mere fact of making the heroine deaf and dumb and putting the clichés in the sign language, the author has managed to give his play an undeniable sort of primitive audience interest. An antique stencil of dramatic writing is none the less an antique stencil of dramatic writing because it is first given by signs and then slowly interpreted by the doctor, who once worked in a sanatorium for deaf mutes. But somehow this particular device does make it more bearable.

* * *

As a matter of fact, after you have watched a couple of acts of romantic dumb show between hero and heroine, with even the upstanding old father finally getting the knack of the thing, you begin to look upon every one in the cast that doesn't know the sign language as being automatically a scoundrel. In the final scene, when all the surviving actors get pretty noble at the trial and even the heroine manages to say a word, you find that ignorance of the signs for cow and marriage really doesn't make one a villain, and this discovery comes as a pleasant surprise. As long as "Johnny Belinda" is confining itself to the episodes between the girl, the doctor and the father it manages to be rather touching, but once the villains begin plotting to steal the child from the heroine, things get too thick and you recall that "Johnny Belinda" is just trash after all.

* * *

If the new work, for all its antique melodrama, manages to capture not only considerable audience interest, but even moments of dignity, the credit goes entirely to Miss Helen Craig, who plays the hapless heroine. It is a remarkably touching, honest and sensitive performance that Miss Craig brings to her role, and she achieves the unusual feat of making the characterization not merely a tour de force but a genuinely credible and sympathetic portrait of a pathetic and gallant human being. Miss Craig gives even the cheddiness of the melodrama a saving honesty. There is likewise a good performance by the veteran Louis Hector as the slow-witted but eventually compassionate father, while Horace McNally manages the difficult part of the sympathetic doctor credibly. The sign language cannot make "Johnny Belinda" a good play but, for two acts, it does make it a bearable one.

"Johnny Belinda"

Reprinted from NEW YORK SUN, *September 19, 1940*

'Johnny Belinda,' Feverish Melodrama Opens at the Belasco Theater

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

SET down in black and white and looked at coldly, the plot of Elmer Harris's "Johnny Belinda" will curl your hair, probably into ringlets. Mr. Harris is a great one for action and the larger, more primal emotions, especially lust, mother love and the proud wrath of fathers whose daughters are dishonored. "Johnny Belinda" has quieter virtues in addition, and at the Belasco, where the play opened last evening, the cast makes the most of them. Performance lays a soothing hand on the feverish forehead of Mr. Harris's melodrama.

Probably, however, nothing less than an ice pack would have served. Mr. Harris's melodramatic temperature runs very high indeed. He lays his action on Prince Edward Island, off the coast of Nova Scotia, and his heroine is a deaf and dumb girl who is discovered laboring in a grist mill. She is discovered by a violent young fisherman and rape ensues in the twinkling of an eye. This is known as plot. But a young physician comes to the girl's aid, raises her from an almost animal existence, teaches her sign language and eventually falls in love with her. He saves her from a beating at the hands of her rough but good-hearted father, who plans to chastise from her the name of her betrayer. When her father is killed by a bolt of lightning—there are few half-measures in Mr. Harris's plot—the doctor comforts her. When she kills the villain to protect her child the doctor defends her in court and draws from the king's bench not only acquittal but a warm vote of approval. Mr. Harris lays it on.

And, oddly enough, this is a good way from being as bad as it sounds. As a whole, of course, "Johnny Belinda" is far from sensible drama. Disbelief accumulates amid all this violence and the extreme predictability of the plotting practically eliminates suspense. But there are still strange little glimpses of something real, momentary scenes which are unexpectedly affecting. One grows to suspect that the author has run across people rather like these somewhere, and seen them with some sympathy and understanding, and then made up altogether the wrong story about them.

Certainly as acted by Helen Craig, who doesn't speak a word until precisely the moment you know she is going to speak a word, the character of Belinda is often touching. Miss Craig's pantomime is not always subtle, but there is warmth and feeling in her acting. Horace McNally plays the role of the ministering physician with restraint and with a kind of convincing gentleness, and Louis Hector makes a formidable, but essentially appealing, father. If a playwright is going to have villains like Locky McCormick, a course which I would not recommend, Willard Parker is the man to play them. And some of the numerous character parts are nicely played and rather shrewdly written.

You can't get away from Mr. Harris's plot, however. And heaven knows you want to.

'JOHNNY BELINDA'

A play in three acts by Elmer Harris; settings by Frederick Fox; lighting by Feder; directed and presented at the Belasco Theater on September 18, 1940, by Harry Wagstaff Gribble. The cast:

Mountie	Beau Tilden
Hector McGuffy	Edward Craig
Mrs. Lutz	Leslie Bingham
Dr. Jack Davidson	Horace McNally
Floyd McGuigan	John Delmar
Jimmy Dingwell	Ralph Cullinan
Fergus McGuigan	Frank Delmar
Grace Peters	Valentine Vernon
Mrs. McKee	Bertha Belmore
Locky McCormick	Willard Parker
Stella Maguire	Jane Bancroft
Pacquet	Jules Epailly
Belinda McDonald	Helen Craig
Black McDonald	Louis Hector
Andy McPhearson	Beau Tilden
Lizzie Gordon	Margaret Cherry
Maggie McDonald	Clare Woodbury
Rev. Tidmarsh	Jack Lynds
Defense Counsel McVail	William Chambers
Attorney-General McKnight	Bram Noasen
The Judge	Henry Mowbray
Clerk of the Court	Blaney Harris
Matron	Vicky Delmar

Reprinted from NEW YORK TIMES, *September 19, 1940*

'Johnny Belinda' Is the Story of a Man Who Is Going to Marry a Dumb Wife

By BROOKS ATKINSON

NOW that "Johnny Belinda" has reached the stage, there may not be enough drama left to last through the rest of the season. Elmer Harris has shot the works in one evening at the Belasco Theatre. The mortgage is in it; also seduction, child-birth, death by lightning, murder by shot-gun, a snowstorm, a Canadian Mounted in scarlet uniform and a court room scene. As minor diversions Mr. Harris throws in a lesson in grinding grain on a water wheel and a scene with a spinning wheel. Being a thorough workman, he also includes the kitchen stove and the kitchen sink. There has seldom been such a complete play on any stage.

Sometimes this department reluctantly suspects that Mr. Harris lacks inner refinement. During the past eleven years he has bestowed upon us quite a number of plays—"Young Sinners," "Stepping Out," "Ladies All," "A Modern Virgin" and "Marriage for Three" to say nothing of his dramatization of "The Man Who Killed Lincoln" last Spring.

* * *

This time he has come to town with a novelty. His heroine is a deaf mute who communicates with the other actors and the audience in sign language. She is the daughter of a gruff miller on Prince Edward Island, where the folk customs are quaint. If young Dr. Davidson had not come into her life she might have gone on forever in the dust and darkness of a mill, wondering, poor thing, what the normal world is like. But he takes an interest in her, and starts teaching her the sign language at the same time that a neighborhood scoundrel foully seduces her. Both things make considerable difference to her. They also keep Mr. Harris's play busier than ten plays with a troupe of slack-wire walkers thrown in.

* * *

Mr. Harris has almost got hold of something here. The scene in which the dumb drudge learns to communicate by the sign language is genuinely absorbing and fascinating. Helen Craig plays the part extremely well, and Horace McNally as the doctor does all right, too. But "Johnny Belinda" starts sliding down hill and shifts into the running broad jump from that moment.

It has been directed by Harry Wagstaff Gribble, author of the spoof-show "March Hares" and director of the impish "Black Crook" in the days of the Hoboken foolishness. Both those plays were good training for his current masterpiece. Louis Hector gives a vigorous performance as the dour master. Willard Parker plays the menace creditably, and Jane Bancroft acts the thankless rôle of his wife. There is more scenery than you can shake a paint-brush at, and Feder has lighted it like all get-out.

Elmer Harris has exhausted the art and craft of the drama.